

**REMARKS OF VICKI LOPEZ
CHAIRMAN, GOVERNOR JEB BUSH'S EX-OFFENDER TASK FORCE
BEFORE THE CHARLES COLSON TASK FORCE ON FEDERAL CORRECTIONS
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Good morning, Chairman Watts, Vice Chairman Mollohan, and Members of the Task Force.

My name is Vicki Lopez and I am honored to appear before you today to address the importance of prisoner reentry programs within the federal correctional system. I can personally and professionally speak to this issue and hope that my experiences will assist you as you continue to examine the challenges of the current system and develop the necessary policy responses to successfully address these challenges.

My experience with the criminal justice system is a long and arduous one that ends, one might say, happily, but not ever after. The collateral sanctions of a criminal conviction live long thereafter and serve as a perpetual barrier to a successful reentry. One must demonstrate great courage and tenacity if one is to overcome the many barriers that surface along the way. Much of what goes on behind the walls, however, can and should help to reduce these barriers. It is something that the Bureau of Prisons has been formerly addressing for over a decade. Trust me when I tell you that it has made great strides but it has a very long way to go before it can declare, "Mission Accomplished!"

My journey through the criminal justice system began in November 1990 when I was elected to the Board of County Commissioners in Lee County Florida. An investigation of a personal relationship began in 1992 and I resigned from office in January 1993.

Unfortunately, my tenure as a Lee County Commissioner led to a highly publicized criminal

case regarding my personal relationship with my ex-husband who was my boyfriend at the time and a prominent Washington D.C. lobbyist with issues before the Board. After a lengthy investigation, I was indicted on March 10, 1995 in an eleven count indictment, which charged one count of “honest services” mail fraud, one count of bribery and eight counts of using a facility in interstate commerce to commit bribery. My criminal trial began on April 1, 1997 and ended two weeks later on April 15 with a sole count of conviction for “honest services” mail fraud.

On November 14, 1997, I was sentenced to 27 months in prison and, after losing my appeal to the 11th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals, I self-surrendered on August 9, 1999 to a Federal Correctional Complex (FCC) located in Coleman, Florida, approximately 50 miles northwest of Orlando. The Complex includes four facilities – two high security penitentiaries for males, a medium security federal correctional institution for males with an adjacent minimum-security satellite camp for females; and a low security federal correctional institution for males.

On November 21, 2000, President Clinton commuted my sentence after having served fifteen and half months. On December 9, 2004, Governor Jeb Bush and the Florida Cabinet restored my civil rights. The stars finally aligned when on June 24, 2010, the United States Supreme Court held in an unrelated case (U.S. v. Skilling) that the federal statute governing honest services fraud could only apply to cases involving bribery and kickbacks. I was acquitted of bribery and thus filed my Petition of Writ of Error *Coram Nobis* to vacate my conviction. The government joined in seeking the Writ of Error *Coram Nobis* and on

February 14, 2011, the U.S. District Court of the Middle District of Florida granted my motion and vacated the judgment, which completely nullifies my conviction and clears my record of any conviction. Some might say that this is where the story ends, however; it does not.

In April 2005, I was appointed and served as chairman to Governor Jeb Bush's Ex-Offender Task Force, which was charged with the responsibility of identifying barriers to successful reentry and providing recommendations that would eliminate these barriers. I arranged for the Task Force to hold one of its meetings at FCC Coleman, which at the time was exploring cutting edge reentry programs such as reentry summits that invited resources from the community to present to and connect with the inmate population as well as inmate access to secure email communications. This occurred under the leadership of then Warden Carlyle Holder who had emerged as one of a few correctional leaders who truly understood the important concept that reentry begins on the first day of incarceration.

During my time at Coleman as Inmate 14246-018, I personally observed the many shortfalls of the federal corrections system and how it was contributing to the high recidivism rates. Although my work was focused on Florida's correctional system, I expanded my efforts to include the federal correctional system given my own experiences and the large number of federal inmates returning home each year to communities across the state. My work with the Task Force afforded me the opportunity to work closely with DonaLee Breazzano, who had been appointed by former BOP Director, Harley Lappin as the

Bureau Chief-Administrator National Reentry Affairs Branch, a position she continues to hold today.

Our work and the research conducted by many experts over the last ten years has proven that many factors, such as employment, housing, substance abuse treatment, access to affordable healthcare, family reunification, and education, must be in place if one is to experience a successful and safe reentry. We have also learned that much of the reentry success is attributed to the various reentry programs that currently exist in many prisons across the country and those in the community. However, the lack of implementation and consistency in many cases has often thwarted even our best efforts. The sheer numbers of inmates and the fact that reentry programs are so underfunded across board makes preparing ALL inmates for reentry through an individualized approach a near impossibility.

In addition, the disconnection between the reentry efforts behind the walls and those available at the community level, if there are any, is also a great challenge that falls squarely with community corrections. Many, if not all, federal inmates transition home through halfway houses, which often do not successfully or seamlessly handoff their clients back into the community. Reentry programs are not often a priority and many inmates are placed on home confinement soon after arriving and prior to connecting with the relevant reentry networks. I cannot tell you how many ill-prepared inmates have reached out to me as they return home looking for resources in which to assist them in their transition.

These cries for help demonstrate and highlight the serious need to connect all of the dots along the way within the correctional system.

I hope that the Task Force will study what reentry programming currently exists and recommend that the BOP implement the very best practices, including those that happen behind the walls and develop and/or partner with community-based organizations providing reentry services.

If there is one sure way to reduce the federal prison population it is by addressing the barriers to a successful reentry and implementing policies and programs that will provide the necessary framework to ensure that every federal prisoner that is released gets the second chance he or she deserves if they desire. Make no mistake – prisoner reentry is a complex but critical element to the equation that you are exploring and one that deserves a great deal more of attention.

One recommendation that I hope will be included in your final report would be the creation of a federal reentry task force much like the one I chaired in Florida and like the one Governor Cuomo created last year in New York. The work is daunting and not for the faint of heart but, if done correctly, could establish a new day dawned for corrections and would begin to turn the tide of the unacceptable high rates of incarceration and recidivism we see today. Imagine the possibilities.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to participate in this very important effort.